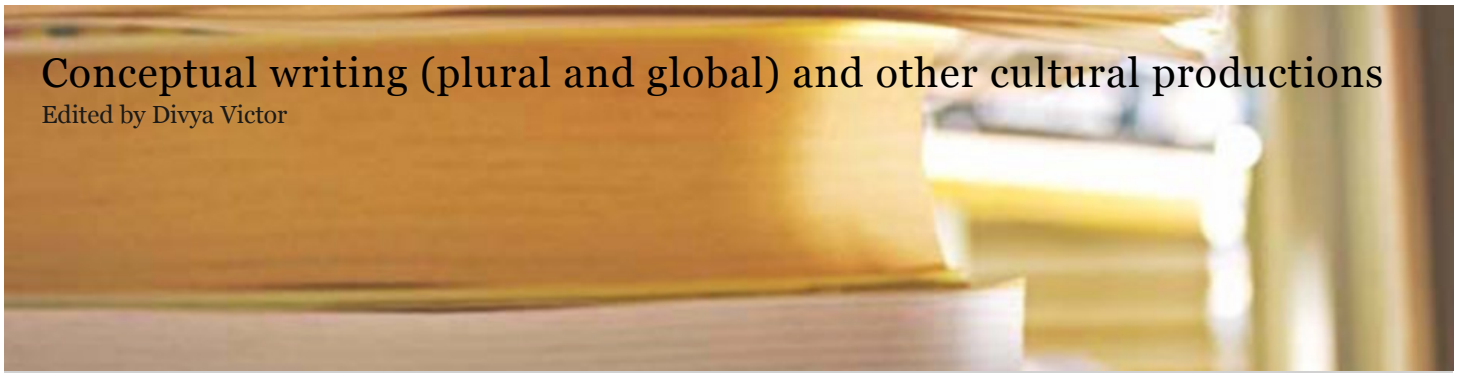
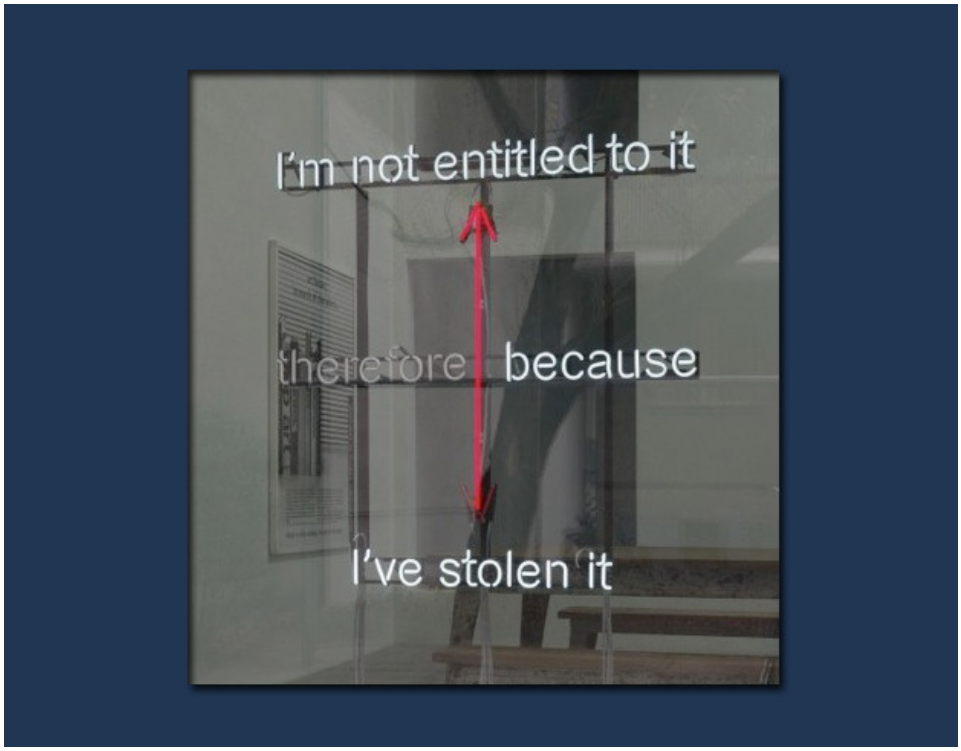


Conceptual writing (plural and global) and other cultural productions

Edited by Divya Victor

On settler conceptualism

MICHAEL NARDONE



Claire Fontaine, 'Untitled (I've stolen it),' 2014.

My initial engagement with and understanding of the expanded practices of Conceptual writing is situated within a particular geography — Denendeh, or the Northwest Territories of Canada — during the proposed Mackenzie Valley Gas Project hearings held throughout the territory. The purpose of the proposed pipeline was to pump natural gas from Arctic Ocean reserves south across the entire territory to Alberta, where it would fuel the production of tar sands oil. Many considered the project to be "basin-opening," meaning that it would serve as a main artery for dozens, if not hundreds, of smaller pipelines that would tap into it, accelerating the infectious spread of Alberta's boom-and-bust petro-economics throughout the North.

The pipeline hearings and media depicting the hearings — testimonies; court transcripts; environmental impact assessments; informative publications such as pamphlets and websites produced by groups with competing interests, i.e. the National Energy Board, Indigenous governments, the pipeline proponents, and environmental organizations; radio and newspaper coverage — were a complex milieu of language. Eleven different languages were used throughout the proceedings: Chipewyan, Cree, Dogrib, English, French, Gwich'in, Inuinnaqtun, Inuktitut, Inuvialuktun, North Slavey, and South Slavey. Often, specific terms and phrases made translation — into other languages, into other epistemological frameworks — exceptionally difficult: for example, words regarding land and livelihood in the various Indigenous languages, or the scientific terms and

practices of biologists and ecologists, or the industrial specificities and corporate-speak of the pipeline proponents. Additionally, these languages and their vocabularies were staged within the settler-colonial process of the hearings, which had their own procedures and jargon that were alienating to many while benefitting the corporations and governmental departments that have historically catalyzed social violence and environmental devastation in the North.

I remember attending the hearings and listening to the proponents' lawyers speak variations of the word "mitigation" over and over. The proponents would employ "mitigation measures" to offset any adverse impact the pipeline and its construction would have on the land, its animals, and inhabitants. The effects that increased resource exploration and excavation would have on the Beaufort Sea, the Arctic tundra, and Mackenzie-Valley corridor would be "mitigated." The impact the pipeline would have on the bird sanctuary where the natural gas fields were located would be "mitigated." The fact that herds of caribou would not be able to cross into their calving grounds during construction would be "mitigated." Changes to the permafrost around the pipeline would be "mitigated." The social repercussions of hundreds of temporary workers — mostly men from the south — moving into small, remote Indigenous communities would be "mitigated." Again and again, they said it. "Mitigation" became a concept that, in their mouths, had no meaning whatsoever. Yet its function was clear: "Mitigation" was a word that could satisfy the juridical demands of the process, ward off further scrutiny from environmental groups, while obfuscating and deterring others from challenging the proposal.

I remember listening to an afternoon Dogrib radio broadcast in which the pipeline was discussed at length. I wrote a list of every English word spoken during that hour:

environmental impact assessment
Norman Wells
pipeline
National Energy Board
joint review panel
Northwest Territories
Exxon-Mobil
Premier Floyd Roland
Aboriginal Pipeline Group
access agreement
Alberta-based developer
Imperial Oil
Indian and Northern Affairs Canada
community consultation

These were the words — proper nouns and phrases particular to settler-colonial governance in the North — that could not be translated, the only ones that retained their Anglo-composition in the Dogrib broadcast. If one wanted to pinpoint exact instances in which a settler-colonial epistemology infiltrates another language, one might begin with these terms and the contexts of their use.

I remember reading the National Energy Board's published final decision that approved the construction of the pipeline. It is titled: "Respecting All Voices: Our Journey to a Decision." In it, many of the Indigenous and environmental critiques of the pipeline and the hearings process are ventriloquized and recontextualized, while dissent is edited or erased. A Dene Elder's testimony about honoring the land, its peoples and animals, and her continued efforts fighting against the pipeline appears in the report, with a notable difference. Her comments about honoring the land are there — in large font beside a picture of Deh Cho (or the Mackenzie River) — but the remark about her opposition is absent. One finds instances like this again and again throughout the report. The outright protest against the pipeline is transformed into a gentle suggestion; certain Indigenous perspectives appear in the overall package to highlight the National Energy Board's "consultations"; violences past and future are acknowledged, yet done in a manner so as to be immediately eschewed.

What these examples highlight is how language enacts power, how language enforces power, how language becomes a record of that power. These figurings of settler colonialism is what initially drew me toward the expanded practices of Conceptual writing. At the time of the Mackenzie Gas Project hearings, I sought a poetic practice that engaged the ways language functioned in these milieus, not simply at the level of the word or phrase but as an overall process and structure. I wanted a poetry that confronted the various collective assemblages of enunciation that address particular structures of power. I sought a poetics that documented the institutional violences of settler-colonial empire — its texts, processes, and performances.

I looked for precedents. I read Vanessa Place's *Tragodía*, and its procedural vampiricisms resonated deeply with many aspects of the pipeline hearings, from individual utterance to total schema. I read Kenneth Goldsmith's American trilogy — *The Weather*, *Traffic*, and *Sports* — and found there the idiom of US empire, its carnivals, jingles, and mascots. I read Mark Nowak's *Coal Mountain Elementary* and was stunned by the paratactical orchestration of the global coal industry's official rhetoric and the personal testimonies of extractive disaster. I read M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* and then I listened to the work performed and heard there the stutters and moans and forced silences of documented massacre, its fractured resounding.

These works have in common a transcriptive poetics and a repositorial logic, two compositional features that can effectively portray the nexus of power and language. By *transcriptive poetics*, I mean that the language of the poems is sourced from various "information genres," as John Guillory phrases it — transcripts of testimonies, broadcasts, manuals, newspapers, legal texts — and is rewritten, reframed, or reformatted within a poetic text; by *repositorial logic*, I mean that the authors are working with specific collections of archival materials from which they intentionally select, edit, and construct their poetic text.

I understand that these works arguably are or are not "Conceptual writing." I am less dedicated to a taxonomical title, and more concerned with the compositional tactics they share. They are tactics that on their own do not determine whether or not a work is an example of Conceptual writing, yet they are tactics scrutinized primarily within the milieus in which Conceptual writing has been discussed and debated. They are tactics that continue to be tested and transformed in recent works framed within the milieus of Conceptual writing: in Carlos Soto-Román's *Chile Project: Re-Classified*, a work that documents an attempted blackout of neoliberal terror; in Rachel Zolf's *Janey's Arcadia*, which dredges up and disrupts narratives of colonizing what is presently known as the Canadian prairies; and in Jordan Abel's *Un/Inhabited*, an attempt to dismantle the entire pulp-fiction genre of settler-colonial romance.

"I want a literature that is not made from literature." I read this line from Bhanu Kapil's *Ban en Banlieue* as I complete this writing, and it expresses exactly what was and continues to be for me the primary intrigue of Conceptual writing. I want a literature that is composed of an array of inscriptive practices: their systems, devices, logics. I want a literature that engages the language that forms power relations — modes of supremacy and domination — in the world. Within the milieus of contemporary poetry and poetics, Conceptual writing's ability to take up an array of inscriptive modes and to portray specific enactments of power through language is to my mind its most poignant and provocative contribution. What remains to be thoroughly examined are the differences, responsibilities, and effectivity of these textual transfigurations.

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